

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors by Creating Opportunities that Support Children's Interactions

What does it mean to support children's interactions?

Throughout the day, children talk, play and work together. In most cases, these interactions happen naturally but sometimes children may need extra support from teachers. Teachers can support interactions by planning and guiding opportunities for children to talk, play and work with one another. Through these planned social situations children are able to make new friends, which motivates them to seek out other social interactions. When teachers create opportunities for interaction in routine activities (e.g., snack, arrival, clean up) children who need help learning social skills can practice these skills more often and learn the skills more quickly...making the classroom a happier place to be.

Why is it important to create opportunities that support children's interactions?

Many children lack the basic social skills needed to be successful in preschool and later in life. In fact, research indicates that children who don't make friends easily in childhood are likely to have problems in adolescence and adulthood. Children who lack social skills are often withdrawn and hesitant to interact with other children, may be socially aloof and seem 'unaware' of other children or may want to play with other children but not have the skills to play successfully. Providing and guiding opportunities for talking and playing together will help children develop the social skills they need and may prevent social problems later in life.

What can you do in your classroom?

There are many opportunities to include planned interactions in classroom routines. One strategy is to think about a typical day in your classroom and look at the things that you, and other teachers, are doing with and for the children. By having a child do those tasks instead, you can create many more opportunities for children to interact with each other. For example,

- Arrivals — Ask a child to greet friends and welcome them to school.
- Transition times — Ask a child to invite another child to go to an activity.
- Circle and story times — Ask a child to pass out and collect materials.
- Snack time — Ask a child to pass out plates, cups, napkins, and snacks/juice.

Outside of the initial planning, little effort is necessary to create these opportunities and it is easy for you to provide assistance to children, if needed. You should provide only enough assistance for the child to be successful, making sure you do not complete the task for them. Try to reinforce social interactions as they occur. It is important that children know that you value their positive interactions with each other. Even if social interactions are a planned part of the day, it is important to praise and reinforce children for engaging in these interactions.

Research on this topic:

Research has shown that the social skills learned through these planned activities will continue to occur during other parts of the day. An extremely shy child who begins talking with a classmate as they set up snack together will feel more comfortable talking with the same child during center time. When children use new social skills, they make friends, which keeps them highly motivated to continue to practice these skills.

Food for thought:

*Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh!" he whispered. "Yes, Piglet?"
"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you." (A.A. Milne)*

When children are not sought out as playmates or are not liked by their classmates, they will likely have problems throughout life, in adolescence and adulthood. Promoting children's social development should be one of the primary goals of every preschool setting. Creating opportunities to support children's interactions as part of the daily routine is a worthwhile endeavor that requires little effort and pays huge dividends for children.

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